

Warning: Symptoms May Include Racism: A Content Analysis of Anti-Asian Racism and
Sentiment amid the COVID-19 Pandemic in Digital Media

by

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Abstract

This quantitative study examined the themes present in selected news articles which actively discussed anti-Asian racism and sentiment amid the COVID-19 pandemic. A content analysis was conducted on an array of purposively sampled news articles from various media sources found on the search engine, Google under the “News section.” In total, 20 news articles were collected to examine how media (i.e. news articles) frames the rise of anti-Asian racism and sentiment during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study concluded that there was little information presented on the rise and racialization of the COVID-19 outbreak, but there was a larger tie to the incidents of anti-Asian racism and sentiment and its overall linkage to the COVID-19 pandemic, the racism endemic to North American history, and recent remarks made by President Donald Trump racializing COVID-19 the “Chinese virus.”

Introduction

Times of catastrophic circumstances, extreme events, and global crisis undoubtedly create and stimulate a breeding ground for fear, panic and uncertainty of the future. From the epidemic of Ebola, the potential probability of war between the U.S. and Iran, the reactive and revolutionary Hong Kong protests, to the global threat of climate change, there has been no shortage of the potential opportunities of the demise that faces us as humans. More specifically, the onset and spread of disease in a global context can absolutely elicit those feelings of fear, panic and uncertainty of the future. In the current context, the world we live in is a breeding ground for continued sociological research, and the COVID-19 pandemic – a global crisis, is an excellent example.

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) officially declared the outbreak and spread of COVID-19, also referred to as the coronavirus, as a pandemic (World Health Organization, 2020). At the time of announcement, WHO (2020) stated there were over 118,000 cases in 114 countries and that number has only continued to rise since then. As the situation worsens, governments have enacted rigid and strict measures in order to flatten the curve and prevent the spread of the virus. In Canada, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau urged citizens to maintain distance from others (Jackson, 2020). Unfortunately, individuals all over the world have faced the demise of COVID-19, while others have taken strict precautions in fear of the virus and its potential outcomes. However, for some individuals, COVID-19 and its outcomes are not the only threat to their safety.

For members of the Asian community, the COVID-19 pandemic has become an excuse to induce racial discrimination, harassment and violence against them. During this pandemic,

people of Asian descent have been blamed and scapegoated for the origin and spread of the virus, which originated in the Wuhan region of China. Although the virus originated in China, racial actions have not been exclusively perpetrated against members of the Chinese community, rather the conflation of ethnicities has occurred in this process and all Asians have become susceptible. As jarring as this may be for some, both blame, racism and scapegoating in times of the spread of a disease or virus is nothing new. An “us vs. them” dichotomy has consistently been perpetuated in regard to disease and has resulted in anti-Asian racism and sentiment in the past (Harris, 2008; Muzzatti, 2005). In 2003, the outbreak and spread of the severe acute respiratory syndrome, commonly referred to as SARS, elicited the same response of anti-Asian racism and sentiment internationally, and can be used as a case study. Harris (2008) highlighted some of the racism and discrimination Asians faced at the time, which included racial profiling of and aversion to Asian people in public spaces, including public transportation and courthouses; eviction of Asian tenants from their homes; and the termination of Asian employees.

The racism and discrimination experienced by Asians at the time of SARS was both abhorrent and deplorable, but it demonstrated the stigma associated with the racialization of the virus, which bolstered alienation of Asians by members of the public (Leung, 2008). The racialization of the virus can be paralleled to the current situation of COVID-19, as now all Asians are suspected of carrying the disease due to its origin, regardless of their ethnicity and this has resulted in similar instances of racial injustice and hate crimes. Additionally, the “us vs. them” dichotomy can be attributed to some of the racial actions taken against members of the Asian community and the image of a “diseased foreigner” has been used to illustrate this. Sontag (as cited in Muzzatti, 2005) notes that the social construction of this kind of image was derived

from the connection between primitivity and animal to human disease transmission. Moreover, discourse around COVID-19 confirms this image of a diseased foreigner, primitivity, and animal to human disease transmission as much of the discussion concerning the source has been attributed to wet markets in China, and in particular bats, though epidemiologists and other public health professionals have not yet confirmed or solidified the virus' origin.

Furthermore, in the event of a pandemic like SARS or COVID-19, where people are discouraged from social contact and limited to their interactions with the outside world, the primary source of communication between government, public health officials and the general public is through media – an integral source for the dissemination of information. As the threat of the virus looms on, the general public becomes reliant on media as their main source of information and answers during a time where it may seem like there are none. Although media's primary purpose is to inform us, we can call into question the ways in which media can frame how we view and digest content and messages.

Amid the SARS outbreak and spread, the media framed the virus as a racial infection. Leung (2008) asserted that hyperalarmist societal response was conditioned by the racialization of SARS by Canadian print media. Similarly, Muzzatti (2005) concludes that the media coverage of SARS at the time served to demonstrate the perception of America as a nation with entrenched racism and xenophobia under the guise of tolerance. Racialization was not only a process enacted by members of society, but also by social institutions whose primary purpose is to communicate to the public. Not only does media communicate to us the answers that we yearn for in times of uncertainty, it presents it to us in a way that may influence the way in which we conceptualize and understand the world around us. As a result, it can influence how we treat others in a time of global health crisis. More specifically, how the SARS virus was

conceptualized, received and understood by the general public via media messages could have influenced the way they conducted themselves and their actions against others. Media messages can be weaponized as a tool in promotion of hate as in the case of SARS, where Muzzatti (2005) states that racism became more pervasive and violent as the dialogue and discourse surrounding SARS penetrated media and everyday society. The purpose of this content analysis is to examine how digital media (i.e. news articles) frames the rise of anti-Asian racism and sentiment during the COVID-19 pandemic, where a multitude of variables will be taken into account, such as how media explains the presence and rise of COVID-19, if they draw connections between this type of racism and the pandemic, and if racialization of the virus occurs like it has in the past. News articles are a necessary medium to examine as they are one of the primary sources of information accessible to the public in a global health crisis. Additionally, as other studies that examined SARS in the past analyzed media, they examined print media because that was most accessible at the time. In a new decade, where technology is ubiquitous, it will add value to the research that had conducted in the past in order to examine if the same issues occur, regardless of form or time.

Method

Sample and Sample Selection

The sample selection process formally began on April 1st, 2020 and concluded on April 2, 2020, where the researcher collected 20 news articles from the search engine, Google, under the “News” section. The sampling procedure included the search for articles specifically containing discussion on anti-Asian racism and sentiment through the utilization of key words. Furthermore, the sample was narrowed down to ensure that anti-Asian racism and sentiment constituted a

substantial portion of the article, rather than a periphery. For the data collection, 10 of the most recent news articles were selected under the key word search “racism and covid-19” and 10 of the most recent news articles were selected under the search “racism and coronavirus”. Both were chosen purposively to ensure that they discussed anti-Asian racism and sentiment.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

For each of the news articles collected, anti-Asian racism and sentiment (i.e. hate crimes) needed to constitute a substantial portion of the article as opposed to a peripheral segment. Articles that discussed other forms of racism were not included (e.g. racism in regard to COVID-19 testing).

In all, 20 articles were included in the sample. Below are the links to the 20 articles reviewed:

1. <https://theconversation.com/anti-asian-racism-during-coronavirus-how-the-language-of-disease-produces-hate-and-violence-134496>
2. <https://www.burnabynow.com/opinion/blogs/opinion-burnaby-s-asian-community-scapegoated-again-with-covid-19-1.24110574>
3. <https://montreal.ctvnews.ca/asian-montrealers-say-they-ve-increasingly-been-victims-of-racism-during-covid-19-crisis-1.4880671>
4. <https://www.commondreams.org/views/2020/03/19/covid-19-and-trumps-racist-rhetoric>
5. <https://nationalpost.com/opinion/jonathan-kay-covid-19-it-takes-more-than-a-pandemic-to-turn-canadians-against-each-other>
6. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2020/03/28/coronavirus-racism-asian-americans-report-fear-harassment-violence/2903745001/>
7. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/04/02/scholars-confront-coronavirus-related-racism-classroom-research-and-community>

8. <https://www.businessinsider.com/virus-from-china-exposes-racism-in-america-coronavirus-us-2020-3>
9. <https://northernontario.ctvnews.ca/canadian-actor-subjected-to-covid-19-racism-in-north-bay-1.4871499>
10. <https://abc7news.com/coronavirus-racism-xenophobia-racist-china-virus/6029269/>
11. <https://globalnews.ca/news/6763549/doctor-kicked-out-gas-station-coronavirus/>
12. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/24/coronavirus-us-asian-americans-racism>
13. <https://globalnews.ca/news/6698597/donald-trump-coronavirus-racism/>
14. <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2020/03/coronavirus-covid19-xenophobia-racism/607816/>
15. <https://globalnews.ca/news/6666678/students-racist-coronavirus-photo/>
16. <https://calgary.ctvnews.ca/calgary-s-chinese-community-speaks-out-against-racism-and-xenophobia-over-coronavirus-1.4793364>
17. <https://montreal.ctvnews.ca/selective-xenophobia-what-covid-19-is-teaching-us-about-who-we-target-when-it-comes-to-racism-1.4848134>
18. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/latest-on-coronavirus-outbreak/un-expert-hits-out-at-covid-19-xenophobia/1776554>
19. <https://abcnews.go.com/US/backlash-asians-hinder-efforts-coronavirus-expert/story?id=69556008>
20. <https://www.newyorker.com/news/letter-from-the-uk/the-rise-of-coronavirus-hate-crimes>

Coding Procedures

A total of 20 news articles were analyzed using the following variables:

- To assess how articles articulated and explained the presence and/or rise of the pandemic, a simple “yes” or “no” to the mention of the origin of the virus was employed in addition to its spread, such as via a case tracker.
- To assess if the article drew a conclusion between the racism experienced amid the pandemic and the larger pandemic itself, a simple “yes” or “no” to the mention of a racial action, and the link between the motivation for the racial action was employed.
- To assess if the article racialized the virus, the identification of additional information such as images of Chinatowns was employed. Additionally, a simple “yes”, “neutral” or “no” was employed to assess whether or not the content of the article promoted racialization of the virus by linking it to members of the Asian community.
- An additional category called “Efforts to Combat” also assessed whether or not the content in the article included suggestions for coping or overcoming racial actions against members of the Asian community; this could have been stated through the author of the article or individuals quoted in the article.

Design

A content analysis was utilized to examine how digital media (i.e. news articles) frames the rise of anti-Asian racism and sentiment during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Results

The results illustrated that there was little explanation outlining the presence and rise of the virus in many of the news articles. Rather, much of the content in many of the news articles examined the link between anti-Asian racism and sentiment during the COVID-19 pandemic through the communication of racial actions (e.g. hate crimes) and the connection of these racial actions to the larger contemporary context. Although, the racialization of the virus either through

words or images were mostly absent in the news articles examined in addition to suggestions to cope or overcome instances of racial harassment or violence.

Through a content analysis of 20 news articles, the results can be summarized in a chart below:

	Yes	No	Neutral
Presence and Rise of Pandemic: Origin	7	13	-
Presence and Rise of Pandemic: Inclusion of a Case Tracker	2	18	-
Link Between Racism and Pandemic: Racial Action Reported	17	3	-
Link Between Racism and Pandemic: Link to Pandemic	19	1	-
Racialization of the Virus: Words	0	16	4
Racialization of the Virus: Images	2	18	-
Efforts to Combat: Suggestions for Coping or Overcoming	4	16	-

Discussion

The quantitative analysis conducted on news articles from various mediums found that in majority of the articles, there was no mention of the origin of the virus and no inclusion of a case tracker in the assessment of the presence and rise of the virus, and that there were little to no negative connotations associated with the way in which media had framed the virus. In

understanding this conclusion, it is interesting to note that this is different than what has been noted in past literature. Muzzatti (2005) noted that as knowledge of SARS moved into the mainstream and became part of everyday vocabulary, so did the prevalence and rise of anti-Asian racism and sentiment. This draws the question: If there was little to no information documenting the presence and rise of the virus, then why is there a prevalence and rise in anti-Asian racism and sentiment? A plausible explanation that could explain this discrepancy is that language surrounding COVID-19 has already become part of our everyday lexicon as the public was made aware of the outbreak and spread late last year. So, as many of the articles collected ranged from mid-March to early-April, it is plausible that all of the language surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic is already widely known. Previous news articles released before March and April could have widely disseminated the origin, prevalence and rise of the virus, which could account as run-off that influenced the spark in anti-Asian racism and sentiment.

Additionally, the majority of the articles analyzed did not racialize the COVID-19 virus in attribution to members of the Asian community through text. Rather, there were instances where there was a neutral statement for the content communicated instead. In the instances where there could be a connection to racialization, it was provided through images, though the majority of the articles did not employ images of Chinatowns, for example. This lack of racialization has been interesting to observe because none of the articles outwardly label the virus as attributed to members of the Asian community, despite some of the images employed and some neutral references to wet markets, which have been suspected as the origin of the virus. Though, the mention of wet markets can be linked back to Sontag's (as cited in Muzzatti, 2005) image of a "diseased foreigner" and the connection to primitivity and animal to human disease spread. As well, this lack of racialization can also be linked to sentiments aforementioned in that

because the viral outbreak has escalated (to more rigid and strict measures), it could be hypothesized that this racialization had occurred in the infancy of the outbreak and its communication to the public, which would further account for the rise in anti-Asian racism and sentiment.

Moreover, there was an emphasis on the link between the outbreak and spread of the virus and the rising number of hate crimes committed against members of the Asian community, where a number of incidences were expressed in the news articles rather than racialization. The appearance of incidences reported and their link to COVID-19 in the news articles could further account to how this study differs from studies examined in the past because virulent discrimination, harassment and racism is no longer tolerated like it was in 2003. The progress in time could account for a shift towards a more empathetic, tolerable and understanding society that employs more of an anti-racism view. In conjunction with this, the category “Efforts to Combat” was included to observe this. Although there were little efforts recommended to combat the virus, there were some and this is something that is not examined in previous studies.

Furthermore, there were two central themes in the articles: mention of the relation of the current pandemic to previous anti-Asian racism and sentiment in both Canadian and U.S. history, such as the internment of Japanese Canadians and immigration restrictions imposed on Chinese immigrations. This was an interesting trend to see because this was highlighted in the previous literature to draw a connection in an academic article, but now it is widely disseminated in many of the other articles to communicate to readers of the racism entrenched in North American history. As well, there were numerous references condemning U.S. President Donald Trump’s reference to COVID-19 as a Chinese virus. And many of the articles made the link between

President Trump's remarks and the current anti-Asian racism and sentiment, which could have been bolstered by his remarks.

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this assignment to the Asian community worldwide, who bear the unfortunate symptom of the COVID-19 virus, but whose perseverance and resilience can only be admired and applauded during this unprecedented time.